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## Young people's identity capital and social participation in the life of the local community

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### ABSTRACT

The article contains a report from a study involving young people living in the Polish southern borderland. The research was designed as a comparative, longitudinal cohort study. Measurements of a given variable (declared identity behaviours) were carried out with the use of the same instrument, in a reproducible manner, at different times (in the school years 2003/2004 and 2016/2017) and on the same cohort. The results of these measurements, obtained in two separate measurement periods, indicate a similar value of youths' identity capital and an increase of social participation in the life of the local community. The diagnosis is a prelude to the determination of compensating educational activities and identification of existing social instruments as regards their model and pattern.

### KEYWORDS:

identity, social participation, youths, socialisation, education, local community.

## Introduction

Problems related to identity have long been the subject of scientific reflection of educational experts. In this study, I assume that without the crystallisation of identity, an individual cannot become a subject capable of taking action, a co-creator of the local space. In my attempt to identify factors determining the formation of young people's identity, I focus on the role and significance of the living space, local community and education. I am interested in young people as active subjects of social change and participants of community life.

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The issue of young people's participation in social reality, their perception of this reality and engagement in its creation is an essential issue for contemporary societies, since participants of social life take an active role in its functioning and co-create it (see: Modrzewski, 2004; Marzec-Holka, 2016).

A human being functions in a certain space. The complexity of the contemporary world, the multiplicity and variety of available forms of sharing this space by young people prompts reflection on the role of socialisation and educational activities in the process of identity formation. The borderland (social, cultural or territorial) is a specific space which makes its inhabitants particularly sensitive to the notions of identity, prompts a search for it and often leads to a crisis and disintegration of identity. The southern borderland of Poland is characterised by greater ethnic, national and religious diversity than the central regions. This area is specific due to its cross-border contacts, multiculturalism, a diversity of religious denominations, its historical experience, the near-border location, as well as the tradition of multi-dimensional identity and participation in a well-organised cultural life of the region (Bukowska-Floreńska, 1994; Janeczek & Szczepański, 2006).

Education plays a significant role in the ongoing development of an individual and the society. It helps the individual to establish themselves, it contributes to the development of their self-awareness, the knowledge about the local community, and encourages young people to take different social roles. In fulfilling its tasks, school is supported by the local community, which stimulates its members – especially young people – to develop individually and to transform and create more favourable living conditions (I discussed this subject more extensively in Szczurek-Boruta (2016, pp. 59–73).

These considerations are embedded in social pedagogy and youth pedagogy. In this study, I draw on Jerzy Modrzewski's concept of social participation (2004). I understand social participation as the participation of an individual in creating events and social situations. I assume that "social participation is manifested by: taking or aspiring to take a certain place in the social structure; socially-oriented activities that are specific to a given social system; revealing the possession or development (according to cultural models) of certain psychosocial features which form the consciousness of the individual in various forms" (Modrzewski, 2004, p. 52).

I assume that the specificity of the place of residence affects the process of socialisation, upbringing and education of the young generation. Socialisation is a prerequisite for the formation of young people's identity and the existence of a certain type of social participation. In the course of educational socialisation, young people acquire the competences necessary to accept social roles in the future, assimilate social standards and build their models of action, also in terms of social participation.

## **Methodology of research**

In this study I refer to the empirical material obtained during studies conducted among young people in the school years 2003/2004 and 2016/2017. The longitudinal cohort study design has been adopted for this research (cited in: Trempała & Olejnik, 2016, pp. 134–135). The measurement of a given variable (declared identity behaviours) was carried out with the use of the same instrument (a self-devised questionnaire based on the theory of psychosocial development by E. Erikson, the concept of developmental tasks by R. Havighurst, the theory of identity-related behaviours (TZT) by T. Lewowicki and the sociological theories of conflict [see: Szczurek-Boruta, 2007, pp. 381–384], in a reproducible manner, at different times (in the school years 2003/2004 and 2016/2017), and on the same cohort.

The study covered a total of 443 subjects: 195 pupils in 2003/04 (description of the research methodology and the subject groups are presented in: Szczurek-Boruta, 2007, pp. 171–174) and 248 subjects in 2016/2017 (112 female subjects and 136 male subjects, 185 students of technical secondary schools and 63 students of general secondary schools). The research sample was selected using the deliberate-random sampling. The deliberately selected elements were: age of students – 18 years; type of school – secondary school (technical or general secondary school), place of residence – Polish southern borderland. The studied group met the criteria of a representative sample for both measurement periods.

In the presented analyses, I use part of the empirical material obtained in my own nationwide survey carried out in the school year 2003/2004, namely the results of a quantitative survey carried out among young people from Polish southern borderland, and part of the material obtained from the survey conducted in 2016/2017. The research results presented in this article have not been previously presented or analysed with the perspective adopted in this study.

The research falls into the comparative scheme (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996); it was conducted using the quantitative type, while the obtained explanations had a nomothetic nature. It was based on objective premises, regarding the normative paradigm.

To elaborate the empirical data obtained, statistical methods were used such as cluster analysis, canonical analysis and descriptive statistics (Ferguson & Takane, 1989). The applied software was the statistical analysis module of the STATISTICA 13 package.

## Analysis and interpretation of the research results

The process of emergence, formation and development of identity takes place in the course of socialisation in a specific socio-cultural context. Alongside tradition or even reason, one's own experience forms the foundation of identity. It is experience that is the source of self-knowledge and a frame of reference in contacts with other people. The multiplicity and diversity of available offers gives young people the opportunity to expand their fields of exploration. On the other hand, the increasing ambiguity of the environment of social development may be a threat to the fulfilment of life tasks and, as a result, to the formation of identity. Hence, a number of questions arise: is socio-cultural identity the one that is not subject to pressure, the one that gives young people a sense of security and belonging? Do the changes taking place in the area of identity concern all its dimensions and aspects?

The statistical analyses of the empirical material collected during the two measurement periods indicate a similar stage of identity formation in the studied youths (the average sense of identity of the youths studied in the school year 2003/2004 was  $\bar{X}=2.33$  and in 2016/2017,  $\bar{X}=2.28^2$ ). It can be concluded that the social context of development, including school education, has focused and continues to focus on the replication of social order (Bourdieu, 1990), which leads young people with various personal and social resources to a similar value of identity capital.

The results of the research show there is a relationship between the social context of development and youths' identity ( $r=0.682$ ,  $p<0.001$  – moderate correlation, significant interdependence, research carried out in the school year 2003/2004;  $r=0.73757$ ,  $p=0.000$  – high correlation, significant interdependence, research carried out in 2016/2017)<sup>3</sup>. The identity of the studied youths is inscribed in the cultural system of their place of residence and gives young individuals a sense of security, stability and belonging.

Identity formation is the process of forming a set of elements (life tasks by E. Erikson, R. Havighurst), which assumes a special regulatory significance as part of gathering social experiences in the process of socialisation. Social participation is a result of the social experiences an individual gains in the process of socialisation, and also a derivative of the ability of the individual who has an already developed their identity to take action with the purpose of co-creating reality. In the context of the research

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<sup>2</sup> Declared identity behaviours are a manifestation of the accomplishment of the existential task of satisfying one's identity (Erikson, 1994) (see: Szczurek-Boruta, 2007, p. 188). Average values of the sense of identity ( $\bar{X}$ ) fall between 2 and 3 (an average of 2.0 was accepted as a threshold marking the completion of the existential task).

<sup>3</sup> Interpretation of the magnitude of the  $r$  correlation coefficients according to J.P. Guilford (1960, p. 171).

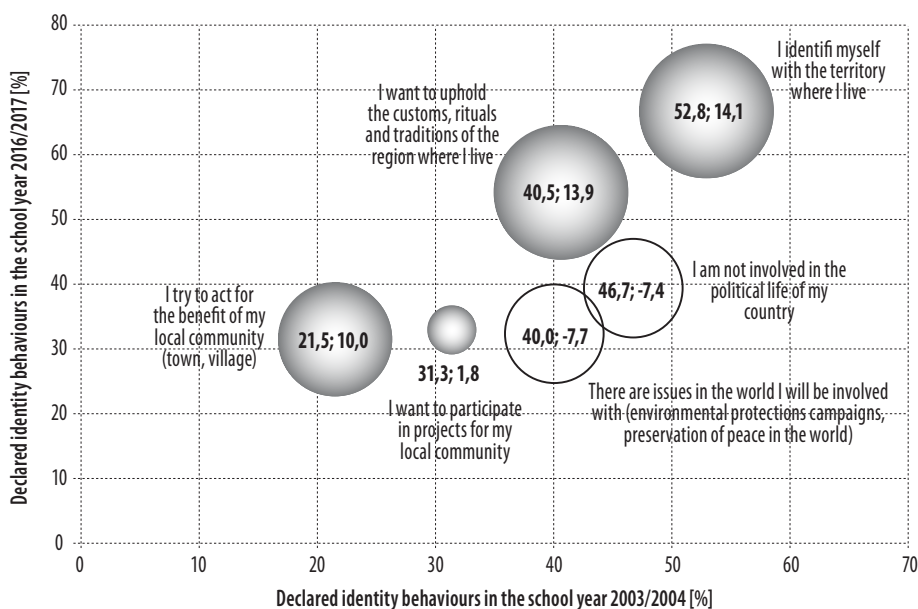
results presented above, it seems important to attempt to identify manifestations or features of social participation of young people that are related to the local environment. The type of participation prevailing in the individual's functioning results in his or her gathering specific experiences, which in turn feeds back into the process of identity formation. A fully formed identity determines the type and quality of a young individual's social participation.

I determined the actualisation of the social participation of young people by identifying identity behaviours ("declared identity behaviours are the subjective feelings of the individual as to the occurrence of certain facts, events, situations" (cited in: Szczurek-Boruta, 2007, p. 188). This approach is in line with Modrzewski's proposal, whereby he refers the phenomenon of social participation to people functioning in a given social system. The author connects social participation with the acquisition of a certain pool of personal qualities that enable an individual to take up the next stage of social participation. He believes that each type of social participation can be described from the structural, functional and psychosocial point of view (Modrzewski, 2004, p. 65).

While describing the social aspect of an individual's affiliation, one can point to the location of young people in the socio-cultural space, their belonging to the community, the environment and the territory. Identification is one of the most important features of human society, indicating simultaneous belonging to different communities, actualising itself in a different way depending on the context in which the person is situated. Identification is demonstrated by: using a common language, having a common history, a group name, and connection to a specific territory. The youths studied under this research project are located in the socio-cultural space of the borderland. In 2003/04, the statement '*I identify myself with the territory where I live*' was recognised by 52.8% young people as true for them, whereas in 2016/2017, by as many as 66.9%. Over the course of 13 years, an increase of 14.1 percentage points was observed in the identification of young people with the place, the territory and the local community. The appearance of the autonomy of young people's local and regional identity is perhaps a negative reaction to trends in the modern society, including dishonesty and corruption of politicians (this issue was already raised in the 1990s by Giddens, 1990).

An important determinant in the process of young people's identity formation is the place of residence (Castells, 2009; Muszyńska, 2014). Maria Mendel (2006, pp. 21–27) describes it as a kind of micro-space which plays both private and public roles. This space, a familiar and tamed fragment of reality, is the part closest to a human being. For the youths covered by the study, the southern borderland of Poland is such a place, a living space, a social reality possessing certain cultural attributes: a cultural melting pot, an area with a clearly marked identity, traditionally cultivated in the local culture (Gładysz, 1972, pp. 7–41; Lipok-Bierwiałonek, 1994; Bazielić, 1995; Szczepański, 1999),

which condition the construction of identity. The historically shaped cultural potential of this area is a solid foundation for pro-social activities taken by young people. The pro-social movement in this area has survived to this day and young people can draw on the achievements of previous generations.



**Diagram 1. Youths' social participation – continuity and change**

Key: Declared identity behaviours in the school year 2003/2004; change [percentage points]. Source: author's study

The structural dimension of social participation manifests itself in an individual undertaking a series of activities which prompt their disposition to take on certain roles in the future, especially in the stratification structure. Readiness is a specifically human form of activity. It is closely related to subjectivity, the existence of the possibility of shaping certain qualities, thus creating a chance to achieve the next stage of adult development. The category of readiness is related to Robert Havighurst's cyclical, developmental task model (1981), which distinguishes developmental tasks, i.e., events specific for a given period of life, experiences which give rise to problems calling for a solution. Research carried out in 2003/2004 revealed that 31.3% of respondents declare willingness to engage in the life of the local community. In the school year 2016/2017, 33.1% of respondents agreed with the statement '*I want to get involved in projects for the benefit of my local community*.' The level of young people's readiness to engage in social life is not satisfactory but allows us to look with optimism



into the future, especially in the context of the results of nationwide reports, which found widespread social passivity, lack of engagement in bottom-up activities and actions for other people or social organisations (*Diagnoza społeczna*, 2011; *Diagnoza społeczna*, 2015).

It should be remembered that readiness for specific behaviours expands from the declarative level to the instrumental-behavioural level, which first of all means that the emotional state gives rise to motivational and aspirational processes that trigger all activities directed at others.

The research results show an increase in the engagement and readiness of young people to take actions related to their place of residence, the social space around them, and the local community (in 2003/2004, 21.5% of young people engaged in activities for the benefit of the local community, whereas in 2016/2017, there were already 31.51% of them). The 10 percentage points increase is significant. Polish people's belief in the effectiveness of acting together and the possibility of solving local problems is systematically growing as evidenced by the results of the Center for Public Opinion Research [CBOS] research (*CBOS survey report...*, 2014). Research also indicates that the social involvement shown by young people is dictated by the current situation and the needs of their local environment (Muszyńska, 2014, p. 182). The increased involvement of young people in the life of the local community is a positive phenomenon. Possibly, it is the effect of systematic regional education conducted in the borderline areas in cooperation with the local community.

The research revealed the binary polarisation of young people's declarations and behaviours – an increase in the readiness to engage in matters of importance for their place of residence and a decrease in the readiness to engage in general matters: the political life of the country, the movement for environmental protection, peace, etc. A 7.4 percentage points decrease can be noted in the young people's readiness to engage in the political life of the country (46.7% of the respondents declared their willingness to become involved in the country's affairs in 2003/04; whereas in 2016/2017, such declarations were only made by 39.3% of the respondents. There was also a drop by 8 percentage points in the readiness to take action to protect the environment and preserve peace in the world (such declarations were made by 40% of the respondents in 2003/2004 and 32% in 2016/2017). Young people prefer to stay aside, they are not interested in and do not engage in national or global issues. This is perhaps a way of "cultural survival" for young people (this phenomenon was noticed by Melosik, 2005, pp. 24–25). The study results confirm the nationwide tendency of poor involvement of individuals in the political life of the country (see the results of the research carried out by the Center for Public Opinion Research [CBOS] regarding the readiness to undertake long-term activities, data from the *Młodzi 2011*, *Młodzież 2016* report).



The third group of features defining the phenomenon and process of social participation identified by Modrzewski (2004, p. 53) covers such concepts as: social awareness, social knowledge, social expectations, and social identity. The concept of awareness is used to describe the behaviour of individuals and groups of people, their attitudes, views and opinions. Regional awareness is one of the areas of social awareness. A significant increase of this type of awareness by 14.4 percentage points is noticeable. In 2003/2004, 40% of the young people declared: *'I want to uphold the customs, rituals and traditions of the region where I live'*; in 2016/2017, 54.4% of the respondents the above declaration. Regional awareness tends to result in the individual's engagement in projects for the benefit of people and groups from the immediate environment which the individual identifies with. It also offers favourable conditions for the development of other dimensions of national and civic identity.

## Conclusions

The presented considerations may be viewed as a contribution to the scientific discussion on supporting the development of young people and the development of local communities. The pedagogical reflection which stands behind this study essentially starts with a diagnosis and aims to assess the situation recognised with a view to undertaking discussions on specific solutions informed by the assessment. The diagnosis is a prelude to the determination of compensating educational activities with the definition of existing social instruments as regards their pattern.

The results of the conducted comparative study indicate that the socio-cultural identity is one that gives young people a sense of security and belonging. An important role in its formation is played by the school and the local environment. A developed identity determines the type and quality of social participation of young people.

I believe that today, more than ever before, it is necessary to develop habits and models of social participation in children, adolescents and adults. It is an urgent and important task for all contemporary educational institutions. If we want to increase the level of trust in other human beings, improve social involvement and develop the ability to work in a team, then actions which promote these practical competences are important. Teaching specific social behaviours takes place not only through modelling, but above all through participation, joint actions and common problem solving. It is necessary to offer education which will show the benefits of working for other people, for the community and the society at large.

The research and its results are significant for pedagogy, as they demonstrate the possibility to build objectives and standards of education with the values pertaining to the local environment and social experience, while taking into account the regulari-

ties of psychophysical development of individuals. The dominant type of identity in the studied youths is local identity. This fact is important for pedagogy, since primary socialisation is doubtlessly more important for the individual and "the basic structure of any secondary socialisation must resemble the structure of the primary process" (Berger & Luckmann, 1983, p. 204).

Borderland areas – including the area where the research was carried out – seem to be a specific laboratory allowing the discovery of the mechanisms determining the construction of identity of the young generation and identification of the mechanisms of social participation which result in the transformation of their own living environment. While looking for these mechanisms, I focus on the role and importance of the socio-cultural environment as well as formal and informal education, which supports the individual in continuously creating his or her own self, in understanding the world and building positive interpersonal relations. Against the background of my considerations, I see the need to conduct comparative and longitudinal studies at various borderlands (to determine whether the established regularities have a wider application), to apply not only quantitative surveys but also qualitative studies in order to be able to describe the strength and scope of the phenomena described in a more comprehensive manner.

The possibilities of (self-)development of local communities depend on the cooperation of many social life institutions which determine the conditions for the development of individuals and communities and form the basis of broadly understood social education, especially in its local aspects. Young people can take significant positions in the future, they may become leaders of change for the local and national environment. The task of education is to support their identity development. Without the completion of the process of identity formation, an individual cannot become a subject capable of taking action. It is education, through providing knowledge, shaping emotional attitudes and involving young individuals in joint action, that allows youths to better understand the problems of the contemporary world and acquire a new understanding of personal and social identity in many dimensions.

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